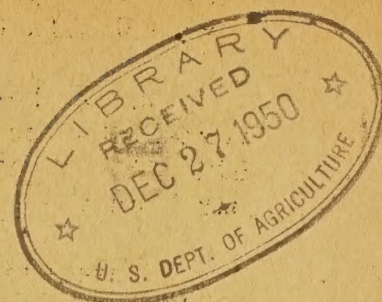


November 1950

AFTER ALL,

IT'S THE WAY YOU SERVE PEOPLE*



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There Is Only Opportunity

The other day I read a statement that made quite an impression upon me. This statement was attributed to General Douglas MacArthur. In it General MacArthur said, "There is no security on this earth. There is only opportunity."

That clear-cut statement, it seems to me, penetrates to the absolute center of Extension philosophy. It identifies the hub from which all our Extension activities radiate.

There is only opportunity . . . opportunity for mental and spiritual growth, opportunity for service.

As an extension worker you have dedicated yourself to service and to leadership in ways that sharpen the ability of rural people to recognize their opportunities and take advantage of them. That is a public service of great magnitude . . . a rural public relations service that should be better understood by all people.

There is only opportunity, to be sure. That applies to us, as extension workers, as well as it applies to the people with whom we work. Ours is an opportunity for meeting successfully the many daily challenges that are wrapped up in the job of serving numerous people.

Good Service Builds Public Confidence

We, in extension work, are earnestly trying to meet those challenges with the type of service that helps people to solve problems, that builds sturdy public confidence, that develops good will for rural people and for the Extension program.

To help us do this, we have the finest kind of educational program . . . one that is backed by a long tradition of service, one that is based upon the dynamic philosophy of helping others to help themselves.

* A springboard to good county extension public relations. By Lester A. Schlup, Chief, Division of Extension Information, Extension Service, United States Department of Agriculture, Washington, D. C. Prepared for Extension intra-regional conferences of district supervisors in the South.

Behind that program we have a rich storehouse bulging with factual knowledge and with educational methods that have been tested by experience.

And we have, too, a highly trained staff of experienced professional workers to focus this knowledge upon rural problems and to practice the educational methods. These are the golden assets which have influenced our high destiny of public service. They have no equal anywhere.

These assets . . . our philosophy, our program, our staff, our educational methods . . . have earned for the Cooperative Extension Service the high regard of rural people. Public confidence stems from good public relations . . . or human relations, if you prefer that term. Good public relations are something with which extension workers have always been buddies.

Agents Alert to Public Attitudes

This reliance upon good relations has been especially pronounced among county extension agents. The county extension agent is keener, more alert, and more sensitive to public needs and to public attitudes than almost any other member of the Extension staff. He has to be. Any county extension agent who does not have full public confidence will last about as long as a canary at a crows' convention.

Likewise, if the extension agents in the various counties had not earned the confidence of the rural public these last 35 years, the entire Cooperative Extension Service would have languished and gone out of business long ago.

But, even though extension work has prospered in public esteem, much more can still be accomplished by the better use of public relations techniques. We are inclined, I believe, to play public relations by ear. That isn't too bad a trait. Playing by ear requires sincerity and an earnest expression of the spirit of courteous service. Nevertheless, if we thought a little more deeply about public relations . . . if we built public relations ideas and methods more firmly into our everyday activities, I am sure that our work would be more efficient. Not only that, but we would earn a larger chunk of good will. Planned public relations are what distinguishes the growing organization from the static organization.

"That's just another job," one extension agent told me. "It's just another mess of spinach to putter with. I've got too much to do now. The devil with it." But is it another job? I don't think so. My impression is that it's the job . . . the only job that you have . . . the Extension job. And I'll try to tell you why.

What Are Public Relations, Anyway?

First, though, let's try to define the term "public relations," so that all of us stand on a common ground of understanding.

You have heard a lot of gobbledegook about public relations in recent years. It's a much abused term. I have a low suspicion, too, that some Extension folks think that "public relations" is a synonym for publicity. Others may think that it is like squeezing a healing salve out of a tube when you are afflicted with an ailing relationship situation. I doubt that any of you are among such misguided folks.

In my language, public relations are what you do plus your due . . . that is, what you do in giving dependable service to the public in an organized way plus your due in getting deserved credit for your services.

Public relations mean the application of the Golden Rule . . . working with and for others in the manner that you would like them to work with and for you, if they had the same opportunity. It's the art of making people want to cooperate with you.

Perhaps I should also give you the definition adopted by the Public Relations Subcommittee of the Committee on Extension Organization and Policy. That committee defined Extension public relations as "doing good work in a way which develops in the public mind an appreciation for and recognition of the program."

These definitions will give you the general idea, although, no doubt, you have some good ones of your own. Actually, public relations are better demonstrated by deeds. Actions speak a more eloquent language than words.

Boiled down to its essence, public relations are contacts . . . the right kind of contacts . . . courteously conducted, constructive contacts with people. Not "publicity" in the sense of organizational puffery or propaganda; not glamorized information, but relations with people that are grounded upon facts, upon a sound program, helpful services, and courtesy.

Broad Scope of Extension Public Relations

Now, what is the scope of Extension public relations? How far should you range in this field? Well, the sky is the limit. Everything that Extension does has a bearing upon public confidence and good will . . . everything from typing a neat letter to conducting a broad public-interest program.

That is what I meant before when I stated that it isn't just another job, but the only job. You're in it up to your ears. Like death and taxes, you'll always have public relations with you, whether you want them or not. So, your decision is simply whether you want to make your public relations good or whether they are to remain medium or poor.

It is very difficult for any organization to long survive unless the principles of good public relations are applied to all its functions. Why is this? Well, good public relations techniques can do two things.

First and foremost, you need them to do your teaching job more efficiently. Your educational program and the way that you handle it constitute somewhere around 90 percent of your public relations.

Second, you need good public relations techniques to inform people, through public or individual reporting, about how well your operating job is being done. That's about 10 percent of good public relations . . . but a mighty important 10 percent because a lot of public recognition stems from it.

So, then, you need public relations techniques both to do a good job and, in addition to that, to tell others about the good job being done.
What you do plus your due.

Why Worry About Others

Extension workers frequently ask, "Why can't we let the credit come naturally from the doing?" They say that "if we really are successful in our work, we will undoubtedly get public confidence and support. So, why, then, should we bat out our brains and sap our energy in making a special effort to do public reporting? Our work speaks for itself."

But "it ain't necessarily so." It is true that you would get recognition from your extension cooperators with whom you have direct contacts . . . the people who know and like you. But how about the others? How are they going to learn about your good work unless you make a special effort to tell them?

That old saying about the mousetrap doesn't always apply. Many people won't beat a path to your door unless they have something to gain by so doing. You have to carry your mousetrap to them and invite them to inspect it and see how it operates.

Amid the hurly-burly of the constant daily grind, it is easy to plug away at doing your job. It is easy to forget or postpone the effort to let the folks in the county know about rural life progress made with Extension leadership. Certainly that would be preferable to a reverse emphasis. But folks are taxpayers. They have an interest in knowing what the agent has accomplished with their money.

You would be surprised to know . . . or maybe you wouldn't . . . that Uncle Sam received income tax statements from seven times as many people last year as he did only 10 years ago. Similar situations exist with reference to State and county taxes. So, it is only natural for people to watch public expenditures very closely. You can see, then, how important it is to report to them and to their legislative representatives frequently throughout the year. People would be interested to know, for instance, that the kind of service that you give makes rural folks more prosperous and helps them to pay their taxes.

Besides that, it's good business to hammer away at public reporting. It's good business not only because budgets depend upon public

understanding of the work for which the money is budgeted. It's good business also because people take pride in county achievements.

From a very practical extension point of view, an informed, interested community is the best teacher that you have. Nothing can excel the influence of public opinion in molding attitudes and in speeding up the adoption of better practices. Good reporting cannot be divorced from the operating job. The two go arm in arm.

Qualities Required

Now, let's explore briefly some of the qualities that are basic to good public relations. To justify its existence, any public organization needs a problem to be solved and an administrative program designed to meet that problem. It needs a budget to finance the program and a staff to carry the program to people. But it takes more than these to make an organization that lives. It takes some additional qualities in extension work.

It takes also, for instance, a deep-seated, enthusiastic belief in the justice of your cause . . . the missionary spirit. Extension workers cannot afford to lose their missionary zeal, or their faith in extension work and in the ability of rural people.

It takes a knowledge of Extension principles, of its philosophy, its policies, and its objectives.

It takes an understanding of how to speak or write or do things in terms of public needs and public acceptance. It requires you to know the attitudes of people whom you are serving, their interests, and their manner of thinking.

It takes a carefully planned, systematically organized, and properly focused public relations effort . . . a public relations effort that is merged with program planning, that is a part of all activities designed to carry the program to the people who need it, and that is concerned with the interpretation of the program to those people with whom you do not come in direct contact. Winning and holding public confidence is indeed a job that gallops around the clock.

John Burroughs said that "When you bait your hook with your heart, the fish always bite." You can't bait your hook with a heart that isn't wholly interested in human beings and ways of serving them.

You aren't extension workers because it's an easy way to earn a living. You are extension workers because your heart and soul are sincerely consecrated to this rural-service cause. And that is one of the biggest and most essential elements of good public relations . . . also an excellent prescription for a life of public esteem and influence. Great things are accomplished by great men. But the ordinary person who consecrates his services to a great mission will frequently do as well.

Who Is the Public?

Thus far, I have talked very glibly about your relations with the public, just as if such a compact group existed. It doesn't. Your public, as you know, is people . . . the baker, the butcher, the candlestick maker. Each one of them is different from the others and requires a specialized kind of approach that enlists his particular type of interest. If we could sit down for a friendly chat with each person, our public relations would be a cinch. But, of course, the number of persons that we can have contact with in that way is limited.

So, we are forced to make our contacts with the rest of them through their groups, their opinion leaders, or through mass methods of press, radio, and the like. It helps us to know that individuals tend to reflect the customs and habits and thinking of their friends and acquaintances in the same economic or social walks of life. We need, then, to make our appeals conform to the needs, problems, and situations that are typical of each group.

By and large, we are trying to serve three broad areas. Our main effort is focused upon those alert, energetic farm people who are familiar with our services . . . those three out of four farm families whom we have been serving for years. They are active Extension cooperators, most of them. They know extension work, what it can do, and how to take advantage of the opportunities it provides.

A second area includes those farm families who do not belong to your immediate circle of cooperators . . . those who actually need your help most, but, perhaps, are too shy in asking for the help to which they are entitled. These people offer one of the greatest challenges facing extension work today.

How are we going to keep ahead of the advanced, commercial farm families who are voluntarily seeking the latest technical information . . . how are we going to keep abreast of them and, at the same time, work sympathetically and closely in a more elementary way with the small-scale farmers or less advanced families? This is a tough Extension public relations problem, but one which will need solution if we are to fulfill our responsibility to all farm people regardless of their status in life.

The third area consists of those persons who do not benefit from extension work in a direct, tangible way, but who should know what you are doing and what results you are getting. They are the city people, or townspeople. Some of them have common interests with extension work and benefit from it in, at least, an indirect manner. All of them have a financial stake in the county extension program.

These three main areas, of course, are made up of many small groups. You know who they are. They are the dairymen, the fruit growers, cotton planters, poultrymen . . . or businessmen of various kinds . . . or the bankers, the women's clubs, Boy Scouts, and so on. It would be wise to make a list of these different groups and then to ascertain whether you

are reaching them in terms of their diversity of interests and their differences in outlook. Each group has its own communication network which you can use for Extension messages.

Every county also has its well-known opinion leaders who may be members of groups or who may cover more than one group. The newspapers, of course, are opinion leaders; also the clergy, teachers, the farm organizations, elected representatives of government, and the like. These are key people. They have great weight in influencing the opinions of others. Keeping them informed is a priority activity in good Extension public relations.

Communications addressed to any group should, of course, be expressed in terms of interest that are agreeable to both Extension and the group. Good timing, too, is important.

Extension's Public Relations Nerve Center

What is it that has more influence upon public opinion about extension work than anything else? I think you know the answer to that. It's the county extension program, of course. The county extension program is the very nerve center of public confidence in extension work . . . not only in the county, but in the State and Nation as well.

That doesn't mean that the State and national offices of the Cooperative Extension Service do not have a stalwart contribution to make. They do. But their public relations are mostly of a county supporting nature. It's the solid-rock foundation of the county program that gives character, authority, and appeal to written or spoken words about our entire organization and its public service. That places a great responsibility for Extension good will and recognition upon county extension agents.

Extension workers regard rural people as active partners with their government in the conduct of extension work. As active partners, people should be given every opportunity to share in developing the county program, which, in fact, belongs to them.

The contribution which rural people can make in the development of a county program has, of course, the obvious advantage of making it more practical and more pertinent in terms of local problems. But the process also has a vast influence upon public opinion and good will.

It helps to convince people that the agent is sincerely giving earnest attention to their major problems in a sound program which is developed cooperatively with their advice. People like to and should participate in matters involving their own interests.

Joint planning will give people the idea that the agent is alert to changing situations and what people think about them.

It will reflect Extension's responsibility for professional leadership in all matters concerned with local rural progress and the relation of that progress to the welfare of neighboring urban communities.

It will help people to understand that the agent is leading an activity which is in the public interest . . . one which advances the national welfare as well as the rural welfare . . . one which is concerned with the relation of a sound agriculture to a sound national economy.

Program-planning meetings also give the agent an opportunity to report on last year's work and to enlist the active support of all major local interests. The public relations values of program-planning meetings are enormous.

Many extension agents popularize their programs through public relations devices that are imaginatively ingenious. They make their programs look as exciting to rural and urban people as, in fact, they really are. This is accomplished by focusing attention upon the program through the spell of magic words and phrases and the dynamic lure of visual aids. Such agents build vigorously responsive public participation in and enthusiasm for their program.

They know that you can say new things in old ways because their very newness is a novelty that has an appeal all its own. But old things . . . they are repeated time and time again and lose their vitality. They must constantly be given a hypodermic of new and fresh approaches to strengthen their appeal. In the long run it is just as important to popularize your program as it is to plan a sound program.

Techniques Are Important, Too

By this time you probably realize that public relations are more than publicity, more than techniques. They are Extension philosophy, traditions, policies. They are the program . . . and our personal attitudes toward our job and toward people, as well as the techniques of presentation. But techniques are important, too.

The public relations tool kit should include appearances, actions, attitudes, written words, spoken words, pictures . . . every possible method for catching the minds of people and of doing things in ways that are agreeable to people.

Public relations tools are divided into two broad areas. There is the area of face-to-face contacts through demonstrations, visits, meetings, casual conversation, and the like.

And there is the area of indirect mass contacts with people through the press, the radio, circular letters, and so on.

Direct face-to-face contacts are, by far, the most effective. But they are limited by the number of agents that are in the counties. Since we should encourage wider public participation in and knowledge of extension work, more and more reliance must be placed upon the press, radio, and other mass methods to supplement the personal and group contacts . . . and also to reinforce them.

Mass methods are not an added chore, as I am sure you know. Rather they are ways of educating and informing people. They are a vital part of a well-coordinated, balanced extension program.

Volunteer leaders, too, are excellent public relations assets when they are informed, well-trained, and enthusiastic. Volunteer leaders are usually key members of their churches, their lodges, their civic, service, and other clubs. Their influence with their groups can be a powerful instrument for widening knowledge of extension work.

Likewise, you can turn to good account many simple things ordinarily regarded as commonplace. It is surprising what an extensive influence the little things have. Such things, for instance, as the promptness with which letters are answered in a friendly way; hospitable and efficient treatment of visitors to the office; courteous telephone manners; signs making it easy for people to locate the agent's office; proper listings in the telephone book; adequately lighted conference rooms; orderly, clean, and businesslike appearance of the office; listening with interest to people who bring you their troubles; and a host of other matters.

In one year approximately $8\frac{1}{2}$ million persons visit county extension offices, more than $7\frac{1}{2}$ million consult with agents on the telephone, and even more write letters to agents. Such contacts provide splendid opportunities for you to give power, effectiveness, and influence to extension work.

Make Courteous, Efficient Service Your Keynote

Now, I have covered thus far some of the high lights of Extension public relations to give you a glimpse of their great breadth and depth.

Never before have we in Extension spent so much time looking into the mirror . . . not to admire ourselves, but to see how efficiently we are operating. We study, analyze, and evaluate ourselves and our operations. We reach tentative conclusions about which techniques of communication are the best or which combinations of techniques are the most successful.

Never before have we had available so many different techniques and facilities and channels for reaching people. Never before have we had so many alert rural people with whom to work, persons who do not have to be persuaded that the information we have is sound and helpful, but who are ready to use it as soon as it becomes available.

We have made substantial strides in the dissemination of information to rural people. All this is very much to the good. But we still, it seems to me, have a long ways to go in serving rural families not now included in our sphere of influence, and in interpreting our program to the urban areas . . . both tough public relations problems.

I hear advertising men tell extension workers that what we need is more commercial merchandising methods . . . that we have an excellent

product to sell . . . that we ought to convert ourselves into brush salesmen. Maybe so. But it seems to me that we can't package Extension information as, for instance, a soap is packaged, then hawk it over the air waves, and "sell" it to the consumer in the press. Our ways must naturally be much more subtle than that because our teachings must become permanent.

The point that I am trying to make is this. We have a world of effective techniques at our fingertips. We should strengthen and sharpen their use. But techniques are not the complete answer.

Sincerity and trust, a soundly conceived extension program, and, above all, extensive participation by people in developing and carrying out the program . . . these are the basic essentials of success. Until you have the confidence of people, no publicity, no gadgetry, no purple passages, or anything else will be effective. Without the substance and the right spirit, you would merely build on soap bubbles. Ogden Nash's pungent maxim fits in here. He said, "Too smart is dumb."

Receptiveness and desire are difficult qualities to arouse in the human breast. The trust of people is not built over night. The results of extension work are accomplished by a gradual evolution . . . an evolution based on effective service, always doing the right thing, speaking in the right language, being friendly and courteous and enthusiastically helpful.

These are the essentials of good public relations which should be practiced by every last Extension employee. Upon the delicate thread of individual behavior may hang the reputation and destiny of the entire Extension organization. And it is always well to remember the old saying that no man is a bit better than the last impression that he leaves.

If every Extension employee would make courteous, intelligent, and efficient service the keynote of his work . . . if he would then follow through with well-planned public relations activities and with adequate reporting, we wouldn't stray too far from being eminently successful with our opportunities. We would then continue to earn good will and public confidence. Like good coffee we would leave no grounds for complaint.

One final word, then. To paraphrase an old Chinese proverb, "It is better to turn on the light than it is to bruise your shins and curse the darkness."